

# Local governance in Flanders

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## 1. General introduction

This chapter describes the local government system in Flanders and developments towards local governance. In section 2, the chapter starts with a short description of the place and role of Flemish local government within the Belgian federal state. Next, developments towards local governance are described. Section 3 discusses initiatives to strengthen representative democracy. Section 4 outlines a number of initiatives, which focus on the role of the individual and organised citizen within local government. As such, we take into consideration to what extent the introduction of new forms of governance is influenced by the existing institutions of the local political system and institutional reform, which is taking place. The conclusion in section 5 typifies the initiatives outlined and discusses the tension between new forms of interactive governance and traditional representative democracy.

## 2. Short description of the local government system

State reforms converted Belgium from a unitary state into a federal state. Belgium consists of three communities - the Flemish, the French and the German community - and three regions - the Flemish, the Walloon and the Brussels region, each of them bestowed with own institutions and holding specific competencies. Communities are based upon linguistic and cultural criteria, whereas regions divide the country along strictly geographical lines. The regions and communities do not coincide, so the structure of the Belgian state is very complex. 10 provinces and 589 cities and municipalities make up additional levels of government. Flanders counts 308 cities and municipalities, the Walloons 262 and the Brussels region 19. About 30 % of the cities and municipalities in Flanders have less than 10.000 inhabitants, while only 12 cities are inhabited by over 50.000 citizens. As such, local government organisation is diverse - personnel numbers running from less than 10, up to over 10.000 in the city of Antwerp.

The complexity of the Belgian state is reflected in the distribution of competences regarding the organisation of local government. The idea to turn the communities and regions into the central government levels regulating the organisation of local government has already been politically agreed upon in the beginning of the nineties. As such, the Flemish government has over the years been entrusted a number of powers with regard to the organic framework within which local government operates. Flemish government stipulates the conditions for intermunicipal co operation, organises and exercises administrative supervision, arranges the distribution of financial means over the local level and regulates the functioning of local

welfare agencies (De Rynck e.a., 1997: 21). January 1st 2002 an enactment, which transfers the competency to regulate local government's organisation from the federal level to the communities and regions, has become effective. However, while the Flemish Government is preparing a Flemish local government decree, the federal local government act, which regulates the organisation of local government in detail, still holds.

Within the political system in Belgium, local government holds an important position, which is related to historical, political as well as socio-economic factors (De Rynck, 2000: 5). According to the Belgian Constitution local interest is regulated by the city councils. As such, the constitution affirms both local government's autonomy - the right of initiative to take up new tasks - and the principle of subsidiarity, which states that central and regional government should not regulate aspects that can be realised by local government (Maes, 1996: 91). The constitution does not specify what are local interests or local competences (Mast, 1962: 2). Thus, local government can hold all competences, which it is not explicitly denied, them being attributed to other governmental levels (Maes, 1996: 87). Next to the regulation of local interests, local government can be forced by the federal, communal or regional authority to take part in commissions of 'general interest'.

Central, Flemish public funds for financing cities and municipalities - the main funds being the Municipal Fund, the Investment Fund and the Social Impulse Fund (SIF) - are being reformed. Other components of local receipts are purposive subsidies, revenues from local taxes, charges in recompense for services delivered and financial profits from assets and loans (Bouckaert, Maes en Van Dooren, 2001:6). The outline of incomes of municipalities and cities can be regarded as an indicator of local autonomy, especially of the freedom to push up or lower specific income streams - 'freedom of resources' - and the freedom to allocate local receipts according to one's own views - 'freedom of expenditure'. In international perspective, local government in Flanders has an average freedom of resources and a freedom of expenditure above average - 50,3 % resources free to receive in relation to total resources and 79.7 % resources free to spend in relation to total resources (Bouckaert, Maes en Van Dooren, 2001 : 7-8).

Next to the local government administration, there are a variety of local institutions that are subject to separate financial and organisational regulation and steering. Municipal utilities and companies are exemplary for putting local services at arms' length. Local welfare agencies take up the task of implementing local social policy. The agencies' council members are appointed by the local legislative, which also practises control over the agencies' activities. Local government is legally held to use its own financial means in order to eliminate any deficit in the agencies' budget. As such, the relation between local government and the local agency for social welfare is characterised by a strong emphasis on financial control<sup>1</sup>. Often public homes for elderly and public hospitals are run by the local welfare agency. Next to this, intercommunales are intermediate organisations, which perform subregional functions without having an elected council.

### **3. Strengthening representative democracy**

#### **3.1. Political offices at the local level**

Local governments' citizens directly elect the members of the city council. The citizens are obliged to vote by means of a compulsory voting system. The city council members, for their

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, the relationship between local government and the local agency for social welfare is a topic for discussion, due to inter alia financial problems.

part, elect the mayor and aldermen out of their own number. The latter, however, is to be revised, since the Flemish Government agreed to introduce the direct election of mayors.

Both the number of council members and the size of the college of mayor and aldermen depend upon the number of inhabitants in the municipality. The size of the council ranges from 7 up to 55 members, while the college of mayor and aldermen consist of 2 up to 10 members. A majority of Flemish cities and municipalities is governed by a coalition of political parties, which together have a majority in the city council.

The partition of powers among local political offices has a dualistic nature. Both the representative and the executive office are attributed competences by law or Constitution (Gekiere, 2001: 161). The core tasks of the city council are threefold: it has a representative, policymaking and controlling function. The city council controls the college of mayor and aldermen, which sees to preparation and implementation of policy decisions and takes responsibility for local government's organisation (De Rynck, 2000: 16-21).

Although the city council is the highest local government organ, in many municipalities the relation between city council and college of mayor and aldermen has grown askew. The college of mayor and aldermen has the advantage of a more elaborate administrative support, while the city council does not dispose of the appropriate control mechanisms. The council meets at a less frequent basis and its decision making is often limited to accepting policy as proposed by the college of mayor and aldermen. This has led to a situation in which the city council no longer controls the college and dominates the local policy process (De Rynck, 2000: 8; Gekiere, 2001: 109).

### 3.2.Re-establishing political primacy and democratic control

As the federal municipal law is anticipated to be replaced by a Flemish local government decree, the Flemish government has requested independent researchers to write down a proof of municipal decree in which insights of public administration and public law are translated into proposals for a new legislature. Following upon this, a proof of municipal decree was delineated (Maes en Boes, 2001). Subsidiarity - local government being acknowledged as a fully-fledged and primary governmental level - and deregulation - simplification of regulation, combined with self-regulation by local government - stand as its basic principles.

In seeking to strengthen the policy shaping and controlling role of the city council vis-à-vis the executive office, the proof of municipal decree suggests measures as explicitly defining the city council as the supreme local office, which determines local strategy and establishes policy priorities and policy integration through long term policy planning, yearly policy plans and evaluations linked with the financial policy cycle. Following the suggestions made in the proof of municipal decree, the city council would receive broad possibilities to determine the college's competences through delegation. Next to this, the proof of municipal decree suggests the installation of a personnel dualism between city council and college – the mayor and aldermen no longer being part of the city council, and thus being replaced by successors during the term of their executive mandate. Also, a more balanced representation of local population in the elected offices is suggested. This would result in a decrease of the number of mandataries in small municipalities and an increase of their number in larger cities. As such, the proof of municipality decree tries to reconcile representativeness with decisiveness and effectiveness. Finally, a constructive motion of distrust, by which an absolute majority within

the city council can replace the college of mayor and aldermen as a whole or one or more of its members, is suggested to sharpen the accountability of the executive office.

Meanwhile, the next step in the reform process has been taken by the Flemish Minister of Internal Affairs, who has put a proposal for a local government decree to the Flemish Parliament. Yet, the completion of the decree is not suspected before begin 2003 (Dobbelaere, 2002). Again strengthening the city council is one of the major concerns of the proposal put forward by the Minister. However, that not all suggestions made in the proof of municipal decree know support and thereby are suspected to be implemented in the near future is proven by the fact that the Flemish Government has already opted for the direct election of the mayor. The proof of municipal decree suggests that this would lead to a disproportional strengthening of the mayor's power position and, thus, the city council should stay responsible for electing the mayor. In contrast, the Minister of Internal Affairs believes that linking the direct election of mayors with other reforms, as limiting the mayors' competences, is likely to strengthen the position of the city council. However, Reynaert and Devos raise the question whether, if the representative democracy is diagnosed to be no longer sufficient in a changed political and ideological context, "the prescribed medicine functions as a placebo, a (functional?) instrument leaving the patient to think that the doctor did the right thing" (Reynaert and Devos, 2002: 4). Meanwhile, the functionality of existing, but outmoded provisions - e.g. protection of weak social groups and minorities, barrier against manipulation or unilateral influencing by certain parts of the public opinion, and buffer against increasing personalization of the political business - is disregarded (Reynaert and Devos, 2002: 6).

### 3.3. Local democracy and political primacy: a new generation of local politicians ...

Both at federal level and Flemish level, initiatives are being taken to strengthen the position of individual local mandataries by improving their financial and social statute. These initiatives concern aspects as task and job specification, financial reimbursement of council members and members of the college of mayor and aldermen, arrangement of political leave, restrictions as to the combining of different political offices, clarification of legal liability and responsibility, and training of individual local mandataries and members of local political parties. The cities and municipalities for their part engage themselves to facilitate training of local mandataries and to improve internal communication and dissemination of information towards local council members as to maximise the public nature of local policy.

Local elections, held in October 2000, led to new politicians taking up places in January 2001. Not only a renewed statute, but especially an intensified training of these politicians, as well as agreements arranging the division of tasks between local politicians and administrators, should lead to safeguarding local democracy and political primacy.

### 3.4.... and personnel?

In the past, asymmetry in knowledge and interest for local management and policy making among top management and political mandataries has raised the question to which extent democratic legitimacy is risked to be undermined. The new role local government is taking up as mediator and activator of local policy (cf. *infra*), shifts the local government's tasks from policy implementation towards a greater focus on policy making and planning, and as such is shifting tasks away from politicians towards administrators and (organised) citizens. However, local democracy is strengthened not only by reinforcing the role of the city council and consolidating the position of individual local political mandataries, but also by upgrading

local government personnel's qualifications so as to make sure that new capacities, which are demanded from local government personnel, are present. An innovative programme for human resources management was developed in 1993. Although research shows that the change project is not an overall success, the programme is strengthening local governments' policy power in a number of municipalities (Steen, 2001).

#### **4. Focus on the citizen**

It is clear that political parties hold an important role in the local political system. Parties select candidates for political mandates and have a major role in setting the political agenda and keeping up relations with other municipalities or governmental levels. The political parties' position, however, is threatened by loss of function to societal organisations that have become more and more professionally organised. Also, the low level of 'representativeness' of political parties - e.g. being dominated by specific professional groups and higher educated people - is mirrored by a low level of representativeness within the city councils' composition (De Rynck, 2000: 75). This has cast doubt on the legitimacy of the traditional representative system. As such, attention shifts to further developing the government-citizen relation, through proposals for the upgrading of existing instruments for citizens' involvement and the introduction of new instruments for interactive government. Next to the presence of 'traditional' instruments for citizen involvement as e.g. advisory boards, special emphasis is laid on regulating aspects as the public nature of local policy, stimulating e-government and engaging government to work out basic principles for citizen consultation and involvement at local level through local reporting centres ('meldpunt'), ombuds and reserving time in the city council's agenda for citizen's questions, regulating local referenda, and incidental instruments for public involvement, such as public hearings (Craegs and Maes, 2001: 332-356).

##### **4.1. Local advisory boards**

Traditionally, citizens participation is fostered by the functioning of local advisory boards, which are organised according to specific policy domains - e.g. environmental policy, cultural policy, social policy. Ideal type advisory boards represent a broad composition of interests and, as such, account for the social basis of a policy. However, local policy loses legitimacy since in practice advisory boards are often composed of representatives of associations and traditional interest groups which - like political parties - suffer from loss of legitimacy and falling membership figures (De Rynck, 2000: 77).

This has to be seen in a context in which Belgian public life has been influenced by linguistic, religious and political cleavages within its society. The language factor reflects the existence of a Flemish and a French community, and a minority of German speaking citizens, while the religious factor refers to a catholic versus liberal tradition. The political cleavage is dominated by the distinction between christian-democratic, liberal and socialist political families. However, during the last decades other political parties - nationalist, extreme right, and green parties - have emerged at the foreground of the political stage. The three lines of fracture are to a great extent coincident, which causes the Belgian state to be very fragile. Flanders speaks Flemish, is predominantly catholic and has a tradition of christian-democrat supremacy - although, since the 1999 elections, the christian-democrats lost their stand in the political majority at federal and regional level. Walloon is French-speaking, rather liberal (non-catholic) and with a dominance of the socialists (Hondegheem, 2000). The delegation of public tasks to private organisations is a typical characteristic of the Belgian society. As such, the cleavage between political families has led to the so-called pillarisation, in which private

organisations linked with one of the three predominant political parties - christian-democrats, liberals and socialists - perform public tasks such as education, health care, payment of unemployment allowances or refund of health care costs (Hondeghe, 2000).

The composition of local advisory boards demonstrates that initiatives to support citizens' involvement at the local level both influence and are influenced by local corporatism. Other critiques uttered against the working of advisory boards concern lack of policy integration across the domains which specific advisory boards handle, aldermen being member or president of an advisory board - and as such advising themselves -, pressure of party politics, badly organised information transfer between advisory boards and the city council, lack of administrative and technical support, role conflict concerning the position of administrators within advisory boards and lack of evaluation of the boards' structure and functioning (De Rynck, 2000: 77).

#### 4.2. Boards organised according to territorial lines

Next to advisory boards organised according to specific policy domains, there are boards organised according to territorial lines. In going about policy problems in communities, neighbourhoods and districts, one tries to answer both the criticism of functional sectarianism and that of osmosis of public powers and traditional, functional interest groups.

The centralisation-decentralisation process in the city of Antwerp shows how, in order to upgrade the democratic legitimacy of policy, intra-local decentralisation is put on the political agenda. After a conflictuous amalgamation of the city of Antwerp with seven neighbouring municipalities in 1983, the newly elected city council granted the former municipalities the status of city districts. The district councils were appointed by the city council and held only advisory power. The 1988 local elections produced a shock to traditional political actors. The extreme right wing party Vlaams Blok obtained an important number of city council seats. In fact, the Vlaams Blok has been growing since and has become the biggest political party in Antwerp. However, due to a "cordon sanitair" against the Vlaams Blok that the other parties agreed on, the Vlaams Blok is still in opposition and the city is led by a so-called 'grand coalition' in which almost all other parties unite. In order to restore citizens' confidence, the city of Antwerp has decentralised some of its powers to the city-districts. The fear for an extreme right wing majority in some of the districts, however, prevented the decentralised powers to be extensive (Van Assche, 2002: 8). The city districts were for the first time directly elected in October 2000 and installed on January 1<sup>st</sup> 2001.

The Flemish government thus encourages major cities to heighten government representativeness by making use of the possibility to set up intra-local territorially decentralised bodies at district level. Next to district councils, which have limited responsibilities as to local policy, cities can erect neighbourhood consultation groups, which are advisory boards consisting of decentralised civil servants, representatives of organisations active in the neighbourhood and relevant neighbourhood networks (Daemen and Ringeling, 2000: 124).

The installation of formal district councils in the city of Antwerp is still recent, and as such it is hard to evaluate its effects on citizens' participation and on the legitimacy of the political-administrative system. However, according to Van Assche there are some indications that the districts prepare recognisable policies on local level, which could improve citizen participation. Analysing the coalition agreements, Van Assche finds that the districts intend to

take a lot of initiatives to connect with the citizens – e.g. communication with the citizens, enhancement of neighbourhood life, support of voluntary organisations and movements, direct contact through neighbourhood visits, and initiatives to give citizens an opportunity for direct participation through good participation with advisory boards, the erection of youth district councils, the use of surveys to prepare decisions and the possibility for citizens to raise questions before the formal meeting of the district council. Yet, overall the political impact of the districts is still small (Van Assche, 2002: 20). Also, the analysis of the results of an evaluation congress held in February 2002 seems to affirm the idea that next to the gap between the city government and the citizens a new gap is appearing, namely what Daemen and Ringeling called ‘the gap between decentralised officials at the implementation level and the officials in City Hall operating at a more general level of policy formulation’ (Daemen and Ringeling, 2000: 125).

#### 4.3. ‘Volksraadplegingen’

The notorious national referendum of 1950 concerning the question if king Leopold II should reascend the throne, resulted in the demonstration of a deep cleavage between Flanders and Wallonie, and has during a long time raised political scepticism towards the use of referenda as an instrument for direct democracy. However, after the 1991 elections and the breakthrough of extreme right, initiatives to bridge the so-called gap between politics and the citizen came to be the centre of attention (Verbeke, 2001: 6-7).

Local referenda or ‘volksraadplegingen’<sup>2</sup> were made possible by a 1995 law, which was revised in 1999. Local referenda are initiated on initiative of the city council or by request of the citizens. A referendum is mandated when at least 20 % of citizens in municipalities counting less than 15.000 inhabitants, 3000 citizens in municipalities counting between 15.000 and 29.999 inhabitants, and 10 % of inhabitants in municipalities counting 30.000 or more inhabitants support the request for a local referendum.

The subject of local referenda should relate to topics, which are part of the city council’s competences. Topics concerning personnel, local accounts and budgets, municipal taxes and retributions, as well as specific issues concerning foreigners - these last topics, however, not being competences of the city council - cannot be subjected to citizens’ consultation. At least one month before the referendum takes place, local government has to put a brochure at the disposal of local population in which the topic is explained in an objective manner. The topic must be translated into a question which can be answered by a simple yes or no answer.

Local referenda cannot be organised during a period of sixteen months before local elections or forty days before regional, federal and European elections. Other restrictions concern the periodicity of organising local referenda. Local referenda can only be held once in six months and six times during one legislature at maximum. In between two renewals of the city council, only one referendum can be held concerning a specific topic.

Attendance quota establishes the limit under which the result of the referendum is not being examined. Minimum turnout before votes are counted, has to be at least 20 % of citizens in municipalities counting less than 15.000 inhabitants, 3000 citizens in municipalities counting between 15.000 and 29.999 inhabitants, and 10 % of inhabitants in municipalities counting 30.000 or more inhabitants support the request for a local referendum; these quota being identical to the minimum criteria for carrying out a referendum on citizen’s initiative (Craegs and Maes, 2001: 349).

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<sup>2</sup> According to Craegs and Maes, the use of the term ‘volksraadpleging’ rather than ‘referendum’ in the Belgian Constitution, accentuates the mere consultative – that is, non-decisive and non-corrective – character of the instrument (Craegs and Maes, 2001: 345).

Up to now, local referenda had little success in drumming up citizens (Craegs and Maes, 2001: 329). Interest groups have an important role in mobilising their rank and file. Next to this, the scarce initiatives demonstrate inequalities in access to media and lack of representatives of certain sections of the population – e.g. lower educated citizens (De Rynck, 2000: 79; Buelens, 1998: 25). As such, past experiences have given rise to discussion concerning the need for compulsory attendance. Buelens however states that, although referenda do not succeed to include the total population in decision making, the group involved is bigger than those that are traditionally involved in the ‘midfield’ and utter their opinion through political party channels, while at the same time, political parties are believed to be less and less capable of voicing the will of the people (Buelens, 1998: 28).

The local referenda have no binding power. However, if attendance quota are reached and results are clear and local government has committed itself to respecting the outcomes of the referendum, chances are small that the referendum’s results will be disregarded (Craegs and Maes, 2001: 349). As such, results put a high pressure on local government. This has led to clashes between national political parties promoting interactive citizenship and local political parties, which hold majority in the city council, promoting local policy. Past experiences show that rather than ideological principles, the fact of being in the opposition or holding majority determines the position of local political parties pro or against referenda (Buelens, 1998: 27).

Finally, opponents of referenda state that politics is too difficult to be translated into a simple yes or no question, while the collective consciousness is doubted to be strong enough to handle delicate topics through referenda (Verbeke, 2001: 12). In relation to this, it is stated that direct democracy only holds if it is used sparsely and in relation to specific topics, that handle complex policy problem (De Rynck, 2000: 79-82).

#### 4.4. Strategic local-private partnering: local government as mediator and activator of local policy

Within the context of the Belgian state reform and the initiatives being initiated by Flemish government, much attention has been given to strategic partnerships across governmental levels, inter-local partnership - e.g. co operation between a city holding a central function and its suburbs - and partnerships with non-governmental local actors. There is much to do about the role of local government as mediator and activator of local policy (de ‘regiefunctie’) in the spheres of economic policy, employment, environment, traffic and mobility, culture, ... As to local-private partnering, however, examples of this ‘new’ role of local government seem to emphasize interaction with the organised citizen, rather than with the individual.

Since in 1993 it was agreed that the local government act would become a power of the regional governments, the Flemish government in particular is preparing itself to take up these new responsibilities. A major impulse has been given with the so-called ‘pact between the Flemish government and the Flemish municipalities and local welfare agencies’, dating from March 1999. The Pact was signed by the Flemish government and the VVSG<sup>3</sup> - the Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities, which acts as a representative of local government. The initiative was motivated not only by the Flemish government’s will to support effective and efficient local government, but also by the discontent on the part of local government - articulated by the VVSG - regarding central-local relations (VVSG, 1997).

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<sup>3</sup> Vereniging van Vlaamse Steden en Gemeenten



Based upon the principle of subsidiarity, the pact aims at strengthening the administrative power of local government and facilitating partnership between the central Flemish government, the cities and municipalities and the social welfare agencies. The pact reflects the objective to further rationalise as well as democratise local policy making. An increase in the level of rationalisation has been aimed for by means of introducing strategic planning. The democratisation effort has been shaped by the fact that intergovernmental agreements prescribe the local level to involve the (organised) citizen throughout its execution. This has led to new forms of partnering between the local government and local agencies, advisory bodies and/or non-governmental agencies (Wayenberg and Steen, 2001). The involvement of these actors can range from equipping the citizen with a mere one-off advisory function with regard to the strategic plan to allowing him/her an actual say during the whole process of drafting, implementing and monitoring the plan's objectives (Wayenberg, 2000: 188-190).

Exemplary is local social policy. Next to the legally grounded existence of local social welfare agencies, the historical presence of a large number of private and semi-private actors - which is linked with the pillarisation - has during long time led to a rather marginal involvement of local government in the social field. Since the beginning of the nineties, Flemish government has been subsidizing local social welfare projects. The launch of intergovernmental programs - in particular the Social Impulse Fund - has altered interactions on the field. Flemish government has been strongly recommending local government and local welfare agencies to involve (private) local partners during the outline and implementation of local social welfare projects. This has stimulated a more active attitude from the part of local government, as well as new forms of interaction between local government and the central Flemish government, between city councils and local actors - e.g. partnering and communication between the city council, the local welfare agency, advisory bodies and non-governmental organisations - and within local government - e.g. new forms of collaboration between local politicians and civil servants (Wayenberg and Steen, 2001). Analysis of these partnership-oriented interactions shows evolving levels of participation, private local actors and local government taking the lead in social welfare policy. A case study conducted in the city of Leuven indicates the evolution from a situation where private local actors take the lead in social welfare policy - the projects actually being proposed by (private) local organisations that most of the time completely implemented them as well under the supervision of the local government and/or the local welfare agency (De Grande and Luyten, 1993: 14) – and, later on, local government and local welfare agency building up capacity of social welfare policy-making (Wayenberg en Steen, 2001).

The Mercurius project is another example of local governance, in which government is setting up partnerships with local organisations and professional groups. The project was initiated by Flemish government, which has created a special fund to stimulate measures against the deterioration of inner cities. A number of cities and municipalities have, in consultation with local actors, drawn up a strategic-commercial policy plan. Provided that the juridical instrumentarium is to be extended, the projects' goal is to organise actual public-private partnership. Collaboration between local government, merchants, real estate developers and other actors is to lead to the development and management of inner city shopping areas. Also, special attention is being paid to the needs of the commercial centre's users. A limited number of project proposals has been selected and accorded funding by Flemish government, which in the context of the Mercurius project also organises training and stimulates contacts among project managers (Ministerie van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap, s.d.).

#### 4.5. The use of new media

Since November 1997 cities and municipalities in Flanders can rely on legislature concerning the public nature of local policy. Addressing citizen-oriented information and communication policy as preconditions for more openness, research has been conducted to assess the use of new media to facilitate the public nature of local government (Goubin e.a., 1997; Steyaert, 1998; Callens e.a., 2001). Anno 1997, results demonstrate that, although 60 % of municipalities employ an official responsible for communication policy, only 37.3 % of municipal organisations have a separate communication department and one out of four municipalities uses a separate communication budget. Media channels most frequently used are municipal information folders and information channels with a local bond, as e.g. local papers, local television or local teletext (Steyaert e.a., 1999: 29-31; 34).

Local government in Flanders is still in a pioneering phase as to the use of internet for information and communication with its citizens. The first local web sites were developed in 1995. Research shows that by June 2000 60 % of cities and municipalities in Flanders and Brussels are represented at the internet. 43 % has its own, official web site, while others make use of sites developed by the province, by private actors or local socio-cultural organisations, e.g. tourist initiatives. Begin 1998, only 12.8 % of cities and municipalities in Flanders and Brussels disposed of its own web site, which shows the fast rise of this new information and communication channel (Steyaert, 2001: 42; Steyaert e.a., 1999: 39).

Mainly, local web sites can be labelled ‘government web sites’ in the narrow sense: the initiatives taken by Flemish cities and municipalities are primarily focused on the city or municipality as a governmental body, which provides governmental information and, to a lesser extent, on-line services. A number of local web sites also provide information about local business and social life (Steyaert, 2001: 53). While grassroot initiatives, originating from within a local community and focusing on social, cultural and economical facets of the community seem to be missing, there are initiatives as Digital Metropolis Antwerp (Digitale Metropool Antwerpen) where local government and community join hands. Digital Metropolis Antwerp has been initiated by local government itself and pays particular attention to its ‘visitors’, yet without citizens being involved in the development of the digital city. However, next to local government, socio-cultural and political organisations use the same medium to connect with citizens (Steyaert, 1999: 57).

Initiatives by which local government makes use of internet in trying to stimulate citizen’s participation in local policy are limited. Local web sites give information about city council’s composition, office hours of mayor and aldermen and city council’s agenda and reports. However, aspects, which are related with direct electronic democracy, as e.g. on-line and off-line discussions about local policy, opinion polls and referenda, score low. Only 4% of local government in Flanders and Brussels is said to dispose of a so-called ‘full function web site’, which not only disseminates information, but also provides services and organises interactive government (Steyaert, 2001: 59).

Overall, new media are used to provide information and, to a lesser extent, services to the citizen-client, rather than in order to optimise the institutional organisation of local government, e.g. strengthening both the city council and the college of mayor and aldermen or intensifying the involvement of (organised) citizens in policy making (Hondeghe and Fauconnier, 1999: 6). Other uses of new media, e.g. for the purpose of communication between governmental levels or communication among different departments within the

municipal organisation, seem to have developed even further than citizen-oriented communication (Maes, 1999: 69).

#### 5. The tension between new forms of interactive governance and traditional representative democracy

A number of shocks – in particular the rise of extreme right – are believed to have demonstrated the gap between politics and citizens. The reaction to these shocks has been twofold. Firstly, a number of initiatives are suggested to strengthen the representative democracy. In drawing up a new municipal decree, one is reviewing the relationship between the executive and legislative, which is analysed to have been growing askew. Safeguarding political primacy is furthermore backed up by strengthening the position of individual politicians and arranging relationships between politics and administration. Likewise, initiatives as the direct election of mayors - an option which the Flemish Government is likely to take for the 2006 local government elections – and the installation of intra-local territorially decentralised councils – e.g. the city-districts in Antwerp – are linked with the idea of strengthening representative government. Yet, these last initiatives no longer start of from the premise of upgrading the existing system. Rather, they formulate new ideas to alter the traditional system in order to strengthen the representativeness of local government.

Secondly, ‘local governance’ initiatives are taken, focussing on the role of the citizen: regulations concerning the public nature of local policy, citizens’ right to information and local governments’ requirement to provide information, as well as instruments for citizen involvement as local advisory boards and the sporadic use of referenda. Although these initiatives take the existing system as a premise, they simultaneously demonstrate the tendency no longer to see citizens solely as electorate, but also as clients of local government’s services. However, initiatives supporting interactive government - stressing citizens’ role as a real co-producer of local policy - are still limited.

As such, the initiatives suggested for reforming local government in Flanders, not only demonstrate the dichotomy of strengthening representative democracy versus strengthening direct democracy. Also, they demonstrate the dichotomy, as described by Depla, of taking the existing system as point of departure and trying to upgrade this system versus seeking for a new embedment of local democracy within society (Depla, 1995). In line with the latter, the citizen is seen to evolve from mere elector and subordinate of law, to citizen-client and, finally, co-producer of local policy (Maes, 1997).

Using the above stated typology, initiatives for interactive governance can be described in a narrow sense as those initiatives aimed at profoundly reforming the existing system through the involvement of the citizen as a co-producer and participant in the policy process. Since local government is the government level with which citizens have the closest contact, it is not surprising that the search for remedies to restore confidence in the political system aims at the local level (Reynaert and Devos, 2002: 2). Yet, despite this, initiatives for interactive governance are still rare. Furthermore, the initiatives that do exist, bring to the foreground another distinction, namely that between the involvement of individual citizens and the participation of the ‘organised’ citizen. New media can be used to connect with individual citizens, but only a very small number of municipalities try to organise interactive government through internet. Local government is taking up a new role as mediator and activator of local policy, through strategic partnering with other public and non-public actors.

Analysis of partnership-oriented interactions shows professional groups and economical and socio-cultural associations, rather than individual citizens, participating in local governance.

Likewise, the traditional system incorporates the organised citizen in the process of local policy making, yet the individual citizen is seen primarily as a voter or a client of public services (Daemen en Ringeling, 2000: 119). 'Traditional' forms of citizens' involvement, as advisory boards and referenda, demonstrate that, although both political parties and traditional interest groups have been said to have lost legitimacy within society, their role is still important.

Finally, experiments with the use of instruments for citizens' participation – in particular local referenda – have called attention to the tension between representative democracy and direct democracy. The influence which new forms of interactive governance have upon traditional structures is demonstrated by the defensive reaction of local political parties when confronted with citizen initiated referenda, cf. the clash between local and national political parties. The continuing relation between interactive government and local corporatism is demonstrated in the importance of local interest groups in mobilising for direct democracy through the use of referenda or advisory boards.

## **6. Conclusion**

In this chapter, important initiatives, taken to optimise local policy making and implementation as well as to improve interactive governance in Flanders, have been outlined. The Flemish situation can only be understood when taking into account the institutional context. However, the actual effects of institutional reform, in particular the long-awaited implementation of a local government decree, will depend on the extent to which both central, Flemish government and local government are willing to translate abstract principles of local governance - e.g. strategic partnership, focus on the citizen, local democracy - into real practices. Yet, a restored confidence in local policy not only requires a willingness from the part of politicians and officials, but also revised interest in and expectations towards local government from the part of citizens (Hondeghem, 1999).

Often an insight in the implementation of the initiatives that are being taken, is missing. This hinders a full assessment of the results of the initiatives and their impact on the introduction of new forms of local governance. We tried to outline some examples of actual developments at the local government level in Flanders, which show that the call for a stronger local government has been translated not only into measures to involve citizens, but also to strengthen political primacy.

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